The Washington merry-go-round

Jack Anderson

F. Post 1/20/75

WASHINGTON — The preliminary, secret testimony in the CIA investigation has focused on the White House itself.

Former CIA chief Richard Helms, according to sources close to the investigation, testified behind closed doors that he had been pressured by both presidents Lyndon Johnson and Richard Nixon to spy on Vietnam War protesters.

As far back as 1967, Helms alleged, Johnson began badgering him to investigate any connection between the protest movement and foreign enemies.

Both Johnson and Nixon suspected that the Communists were pumping money into the antiwar movement. However, Helms reported that the CIA found no significant foreign influence.

Some radical groups, such as the Black Panthers and the Weathermen, had foreign contacts. But the student opposition to the war effort was largely an American phenomenon, said Helms.

His secret testimony was taken by the President's Commission to Investigate the Central Intelligence Agency. Other witnesses confirmed that the CIA files on American citizens largely grew out of the Johnson-Nixon concern over the antiwar agitation.

At first, the Secret Service began investigating every group, no matter how innocent, that expressed the slightest criticism of the President. The Nonviolent Direct Action group came under surveillance, as a typical example, because it "urged members to write Pres and other govt officials to protest war in Vietnam," according to confidential Secret Service records.

By late 1970, the Secret Service developed a computer network, which now contains information on more than 180,000 Americans. Other government agencies also began trading information. Files began to grow on tens of thousands of citizens who were guilty of nothing more serious than shooting off their mouths against the President's policies.

Dozens of celebrities wound up in the files, including comedians Dick Gregory, Groucho Marx and Tony Randall; actors Marlon Brando, Paul Newman and Rock Hudson; actor-producer Carl Reiner; conservative news commentators Paul Harvey; and folk singer Joan Baez.

The CIA, of course, got caught up in the hysteria. There were times when the CIA overstepped its legal limits and conducted domestic surveillance. It became increasingly difficult to draw the line between legitimate security and political security.

This was the atmosphere in the backrooms of the CIA when the Watergate caper began. The CIA didn't balk, therefore, at furnishing E. Howard Hunt with a reddish wig, glasses, a speech alteration devise a set of alias documents, a tape recorder concealed in a portable typewriter case, two microphones and a camera disguised in a tobacco pouch.

Hunt used this James Bond paraphernalia to carry out his Watergate assignments. The CIA has insisted in secret statements that it had no knowledge of Hunt's Watergate role. The supply officer, Cleo Gephart, has sworn that he thought Hunt was a member of the CIA's Domestic Contact Service.

This is the branch that interviews U.S. travelers who might pick up interesting information abroad. Gephart didn't explain why Hunt would need a fancy disguise if he were merely conducting routine interviews.

It is also interesting that the CIA converted the Domestic Contact Service from a routine intelligence operation to a clandestine service in 1973. This was done ostensibly for budgetary reasons. But once the unit became a clandestine service, the CIA was no longer obligated to give Congress a detailed account of its activities.

In fairness, it should be added that Helms resisted most of the pressure from the White House to go beyond his legal authority.

WATCH ON WASTE: The balustrades and handrails in the old Senate Office Building have been refinished so Senators can descend the stairways in style. The cost to the taxpayers: $111,500 ... At Ft. Carson, Colo., the Army is planning to spend between $250,000 and $500,000 to build handsome, new field latrines near the base firing range. An Army spokesman told us it's all "according to regulations" ... While President Ford is calling upon all Americans to conserve energy, Andrews Air Force Base, where the presidential planes are based, has upped its jet fuel requirements 246,780 gallons. A spokesman explained that more pilots have been assigned to the base, so more fuel is needed for them to fly ... Down the road at Bolling Air Force Base, enlisted men and women have been ordered to turn off their exterior lights in the family housing quarters to save energy. But the officers' lights, particularly along General's Row, still burn brightly ... After we reported that the Internal Revenue Service was treating itself to new furniture in Detroit and consigning used but useable furniture to outside offices, the frugal FBI called to request some of the old furniture. The G-men were told that the furniture could be distributed only to other IRS offices.